

## **WILDLAND FUEL MITIGATION PROJECTS WILL BENEFIT THE SOUTH HILLS AND THE TENMILE WATERSHED**

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December 1, 2014

The following is a summary of two recent papers that bring an important and timely message concerning wildland fire in the Helena area and particularly the plans for fuel mitigation in Helena's Ten-mile watershed. First is the "Tripod Fire Study Finds Fuel Treatments Affect Wildfire Burn Severity" in a Newsletter by the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy Group dated October 2014, and second from a paper titled "Reducing Wildfire Risk to Communities" by the Headwaters Economics Group dated September 2014.

"The Key findings of the Tripod fire study are:

- Even during extreme fire weather, harvest and fuel treatments influenced patterns of burn severity.
- Areas with prescribed burning of surface fuels were particularly effective at mitigating severity, even 20-30 years after treatments.
- Areas with mountain pine beetle outbreak burned at higher severity than unaffected areas.
- Elevation, vegetation type and structure, temperature, and relative humidity were also strong predictors of burn severity.

At the time of the 2006 Tripod Complex Fires, they were the largest wildfire event in over 50 years in Washington State, burning over 170,000 acres of mixed-conifer forests, including 387 past harvest and fuel-treatments units. Researchers evaluated differences in burn severity in areas with and without harvest and fuel treatments, as well as between areas with different landform, vegetation, insect outbreak and weather during burning."

The old growth stand of trees and brush, alive and dead, in the Ten-Mile watershed is indicative of the fuel situation all across this Nation. The problem as stated in the Headwaters Economics paper is that "long-term trends indicate the costs and dangers associated with defending homes in the Wildland/Urban Interface will continue to increase." What does this have to do with the Ten-mile watershed? "In the west, 84 percent of the WUI is not yet developed, the housing market has picked up once more, and with climate change as an accelerator, costs and risks will only increase in the future." The arguments against fuel mitigation in Helena's Ten-Mile watershed have been applied to fuel mitigation in the WUI as well and Suburbia continues to expand unchecked into our surrounding wildlands, pressing more and more closer to our Ten-Mile watershed. The number of person-caused fires increases as development increases in the wildland/urban interface.

“Communities are not controlling future development on fire prone lands because the bulk of the firefighting costs are paid for by federal taxpayers and not at the local level (county and community), where the land use decisions are made. Meanwhile, communities either financially benefit,-or perceive to benefit,-from tax revenues from new residential developments.”

The Headwaters Group proposes three broad categories to address the problem. I have summarized them here.

- First, mapping fire risks is a necessary first step for managing risk.
- Second, the federal government should incentivize the adoption of risk reduction measures. This can be done by tying suppression dollars and disaster aid to minimum mitigation requirements, or a rating program to reward communities that reduce wildfire risk.
- Third, the federal government must pass some wildfire costs on to local governments. Incentives, while important, by themselves have a limited ability to reduce building in high-risk areas or encourage the adoption of cost-effective measures. Requiring local governments to pay more disaster costs may induce them to invest more in risk reduction.

We have a good mapping system already in place in the Tri-County area, but there are no incentives in place that would encourage County government to reduce building in high-risk areas. Unchecked development will continue to put pressure on our Watershed until at some point the “big one” will escape control. The program of fuel mitigation proposed by the Helena National Forest will give our Watershed a chance to survive with minimum damage. Please send your comments of support for the TENMILE-SOUTH HELENA PROJECT to the Helena National Forest by December 12, 2014.